



**BY RYAN T. HARGROVE, MAI**

**A**bout 18 months ago, I found myself at a crossroads in my appraisal career. I'd been a commercial real estate appraiser for nearly two decades, having worked for a handful of appraisal firms for a variety of intended uses, primarily for mortgage loan underwriting purposes. But I felt like I had become stagnant and for too long. I was feeling burnt out with several aspects of the appraisal work I was doing. It had been quite some time since I sought to further my career by networking, actively participating in industry associations, taking challenging continuing education courses and pursuing work that required more specialized knowledge and experience.

I thought about leaving the appraisal industry altogether. After all, I hold a master's degree in real estate development and could likely make a clean transition into that area of the real estate industry. However, after much soul-searching, I realized I didn't want to leave the appraisal industry altogether. Instead, I wanted to turn over a new leaf in my appraisal career.

# TRANSITIONING TO **RIGHT OF WAY** AGENCY WORK

Steps I took to make the most of my appraisal career



## Discovering Motivation

For inspiration, I thought about the appraisers I've met during my career who have impressed me. I observed some commonalities amongst them:

- They are well-educated and stay up to date on industry trends.
- They take pride in their work and deliver a high-quality work product.
- They are well-known and well-respected in the industry.
- They participate in industry associations and volunteer work.
- They don't stay stagnant for too long.
- Most importantly, they genuinely seem to enjoy the work they do.

It also occurred to me that many of these appraisers do quite a bit of specialized consulting and expert witness work. Some of them serve part-time as instructors for colleges, universities and industry associations. Others contribute to the appraisal and real estate industries by writing articles, books, blogs or course curriculums.

I made the decision that the activities described above are the type of endeavors I want to pursue as I move forward with my appraisal career. I became particularly focused on the right of way industry when I realized it was a fascinating area of the real estate field that I had neglected for too long.

## Turning Ideas into Action

I began applying for positions of employment within the right of way industry, specifically looking for opportunities with public agencies, as I felt like this was the most expeditious way to get exposure to right of way appraising. In September 2017, I accepted an appraisal position with the County of San Bernardino in California and I officially commenced employment with the County in November 2017.

The transition to working for a government agency has been an intriguing experience. Prior to beginning my employment with the County, I'd worked out of a home office for over 10 years. Now, I work in a large office environment within a real estate services department that includes professionals from a variety of real estate or related disciplines.

Appraisers within the County's real estate services department perform complex appraisals of real property for a variety of County purposes, which can include acquisitions for County occupancy, eminent domain for public projects, surplus disposition and asset monitoring. Our department confronts and manages a number of unusual

real estate transactions, which generally involves collaboration of multiple professionals. As a result, I have collaborated with countless professionals, including acquisition agents, leasing agents, fiscal specialists, construction specialists, architects, maintenance specialists, property managers and relocation advisors. Additionally, I have opportunities to serve and interact with other County departments including Flood Control, Transportation, Probation Fire, Special Districts and County Counsel.

In working for the County, I've noticed there is a big emphasis on limiting mistakes and "getting things right." We must remain very mindful of the rights of County residents and our fiduciary responsibility to the taxpayers. Additionally, it's imperative we maintain conformance to government statutes and County policies.

Striving to produce work that is mistake-free can be challenging. However, I'm now in an environment where an appropriate amount of time is generally allotted to allow for a work product of very high quality. For much of my career, I had to work in a high-production, high-pressure environment where turnaround times were fast and long hours were the norm. With the County, my production may have decreased, but when I finish an appraisal project, I'm able to take a great sense of pride in knowing that my work product is of the utmost quality.

### Newcomer Challenges

Even though more time is generally allotted for County appraisal assignments than in appraisal work I've done in the past, deadlines certainly are not disregarded. If an appraisal and an accompanying property acquisition are for a public project, there are often grants or other public funding involved with

specific dates that must be adhered to. Additionally, at various milestones along a timeline, our projects must receive Board of Supervisor approval. Appraisals are generally the first leg of an acquisition project and appraisers need to be efficient and timely to allow acquisition agents sufficient time to complete their scope of work related to the project.

One thing that's been a bit difficult to adjust to in my work with the County is the "stop and go" nature of some of the projects. Because we are collaborating with many other professionals, particularly on larger projects, discrepancies can sometimes develop amongst different project participants or different departments. When these types of issues arise, projects are sometimes set aside while corrective actions are taken.

One of my current appraisal assignments is for a road widening project that will involve partial acquisitions from 16 different property owners. When I began to take a deep dive into analyzing the project, I noticed some inconsistencies in the project design documents. The appraisal portion of the project has been placed on hold so design issues can be ironed out. A certain amount of efficiency and momentum will be lost in proceeding through the appraisal process, but this is a secondary consideration to eliminating discrepancies and potential mistakes.

### What I've Learned

I've been in my County position for about a year now. I'm absorbing information on County procedures and policies quickly and efficiently, while still recognizing there are a lot of nuances to learn and it will take a good deal of time to grasp everything. I take copious notes when presented with topics and information that are new to me, and

I proactively ask for clarification when things are not initially clear. I believe these types of actions accelerate the learning process. I've also been pleasantly surprised by how knowledgeable and well-qualified the professionals I'm working with in the County's real estate services department are. They've certainly made it easier for me to learn quickly in my new position.

I've begun setting several new goals for myself since moving to the County and commencing work in the right of way industry. I'm pursuing IRWA certification, namely the R/W-AC appraisal credential, which I can obtain on an accelerated basis through MAI cross-certification. I recently became an IRWA Course Coordinator and I am in the process of coordinating my first IRWA course. I'm also pursuing opportunities to develop my public-speaking, writing, teaching and leadership skills.

My recent change of employment to right of way appraising for a government entity has been an interesting and rewarding experience so far. I certainly would urge novice and seasoned appraisers alike to consider incorporating right of way appraising into their appraisal practice. This also pertains to employees of a public agency—it could definitely be more rewarding and enjoyable than meets the eye. ✪



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